

# Alaska Women Take Heart

## NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

Women and heart disease are in the news these days, with the newly released National Institutes of Health's (NIH) study on *Women's Symptoms Prior to Heart Attack*. The data is making the medical and scientific community question the assumption that women and men are the same when it comes to having a heart attack.

Women are more likely to die within one year of a first recognized heart attack (38% women compared to 25% men: American Heart Association). In Alaska, the death rate from heart attack has decreased for men, but has stayed roughly the same for women. At the rate we are going, women will have a higher death rate from heart disease than men in Alaska by 2006.

Women are less likely than men to receive treatment recognized as "best practice" to prevent future cardiovascular events such as aspirin therapy, beta blocker medication, and ACE inhibitor medication.

Women are more likely than men to have atypical symptoms. The recent NIH study showed fewer than 30% reported chest pain or discomfort before they had a heart attack and 43% didn't experience chest pain while they were having the heart attack. They are more likely to have symptoms such as:

- unusual or unexplained fatigue or weakness
- shortness of breath
- clammy sweats, heart flutters
- stomach or abdominal pain, indigestion
- dizziness or nausea

Women are more hesitant than men to take action when having symptoms. They don't want to inconvenience anyone or they are afraid of being embarrassed if it is a false alarm. Oftentimes their symptoms are strange, and not what they thought having a heart attack would feel like. Studies show that many women do not realize heart attacks happen to women, especially younger women, even though 6 times more women will die each year from heart attacks than from breast cancer.

The Take Heart Alaska coalition is rolling out an educational campaign called *Alaska Women Take Heart* in February 2004. The campaign is encouraging women to know the signs and symptoms of heart attack for themselves, and to take action. The recommended actions are:

- Call 911 or the emergency number in your area for an ambulance. If you live in a rural area that is far from the clinic, have someone drive you to meet the ambulance en route. Tell the staff you are having heart attack symptoms.
- Chew and swallow with water one regular full-strength aspirin as soon as possible to prevent blood clotting.
- Be sure the medical staff takes your complaints seriously, does not make you wait, and gives you a thorough cardiac evaluation including an electrocardiogram (EKG) and a blood test to check your cardiac enzymes.

For more information, contact the American Heart Association • (907) 263-2044 • [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)